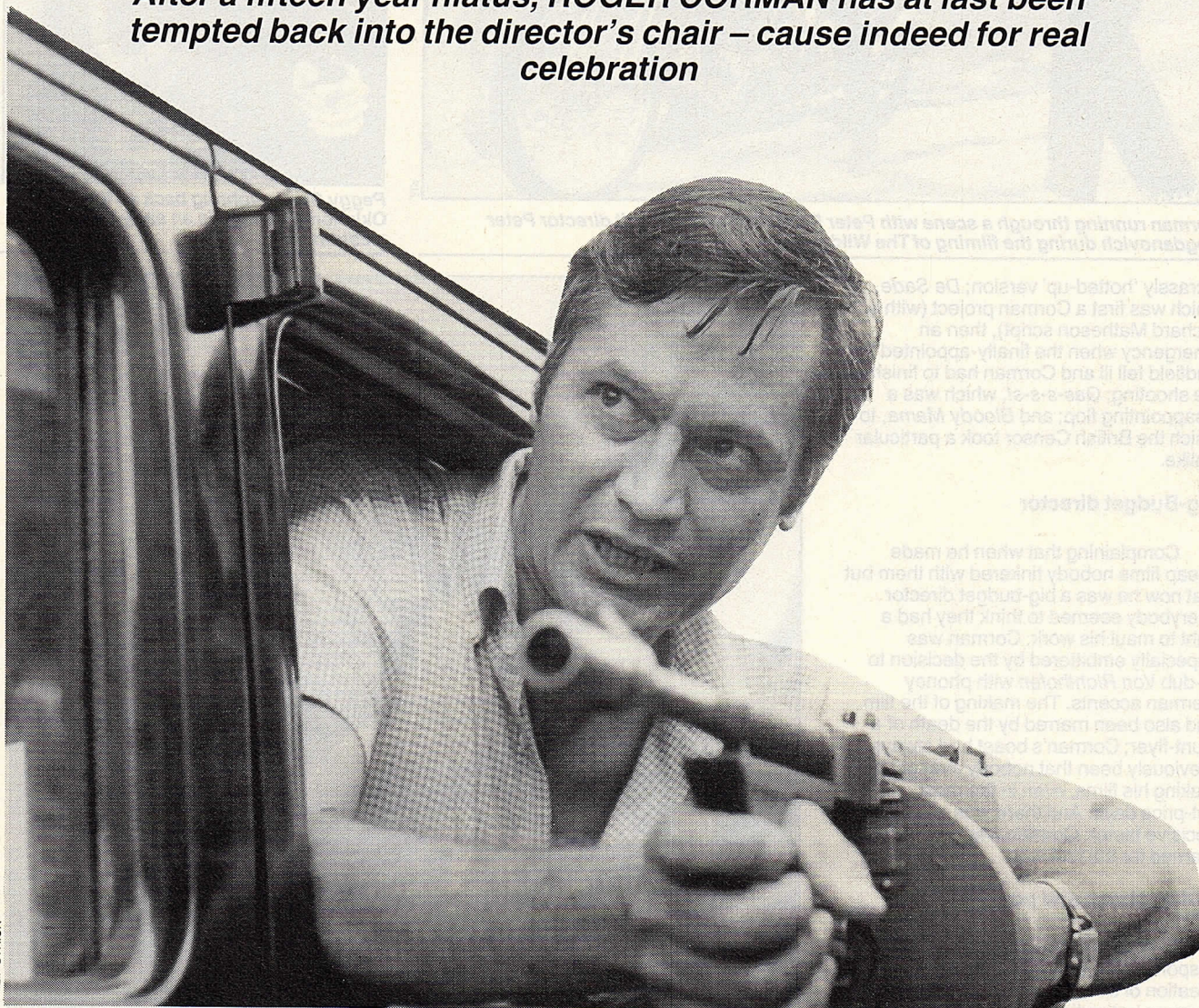


The return of Roger Corman

After a fifteen year hiatus, ROGER CORMAN has at last been tempted back into the director's chair – cause indeed for real celebration



PHILIP STRICK

Roger Corman shooting Bloody Mama in 1969.

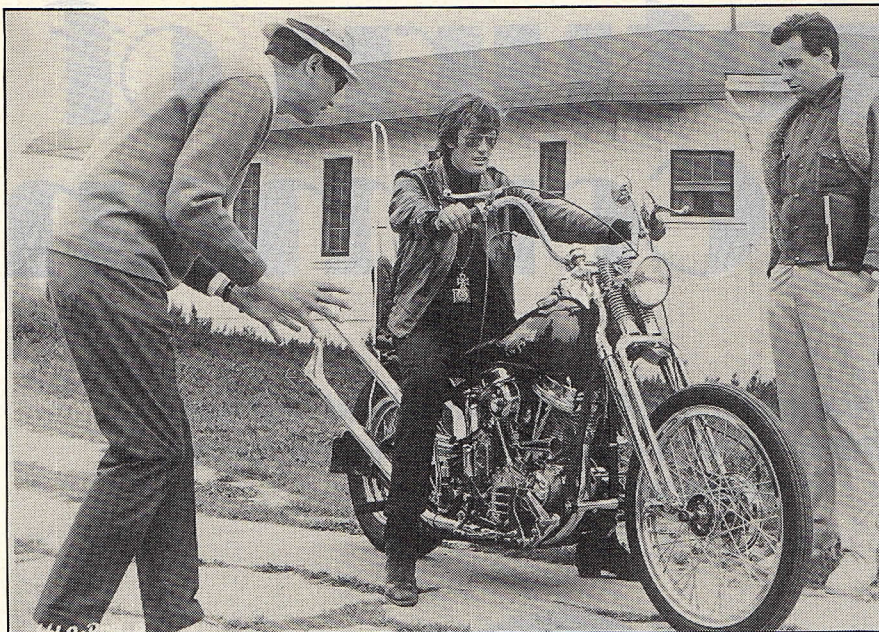
THE recent announcement that Roger Corman has returned to movie-making will come as a surprise to a whole generation of filmgoers accustomed to seeing the Corman credit as producer on New World Pictures releases and the Corman face as a bit-player in such films as *The Godfather, Part 2* and Wim Wender's *The State of Things*. Corman returning? Surely he never went away?

True enough, Corman and cinema have been strikingly synonymous for the past fifteen high-profile years. But for

pre-1970 filmgoers, Roger Corman has a different identity – not as the genial, paternalistic master-mind behind a bewildering range of creative talents, but as a prolific and steadily more remarkable director in his own right. The news that he has at last decided to resume his own career as director instead of promoting everybody else's is a cause for real celebration. We were beginning to think he'd never get around to it.

Corman stopped directing in films immediately after *Von Richthofen and*

Brown (released as *The Red Baron* in Britain) which he shot in Ireland in 1970. He gave various reasons, one of the most persuasive being that he'd made around twenty-six films in ten years and felt in need of a rest. Privately, he'd admit that the five films he made in a row after *The Trip* in 1967 had been, for various reasons, more of a struggle and less of a commercial success than he was accustomed to. They included the television film *What's In It for Harry*, eventually released by his brother Gene in



Corman running through a scene with Peter Fonda and second unit director Peter Bogdanovich during the filming of *The Wild Angels*.



Peggy Castle fighting back as the *Oklahoma Woman* in an early Corman western.

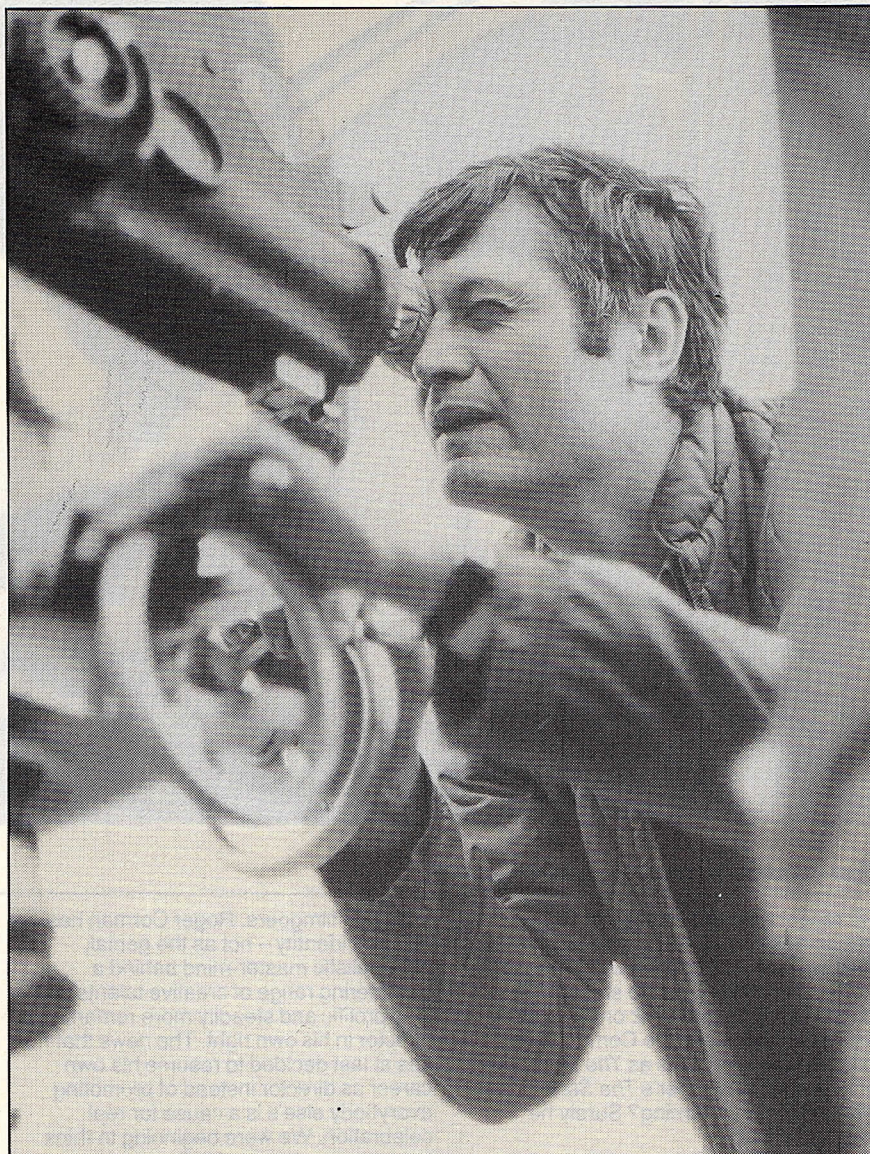
a crassly 'hotted-up' version; *De Sade*, which was first a Corman project (with a Richard Matheson script), then an emergency when the finally-appointed Cy Endfield fell ill and Corman had to finish off the shooting; *Gas-s-s-s!*, which was a disappointing flop; and *Bloody Mama*, to which the British Censor took a particular dislike.

Big-Budget director

Complaining that when he made cheap films nobody tinkered with them but that now he was a big-budget director everybody seemed to think they had a right to maul his work, Corman was especially embittered by the decision to re-dub *Von Richthofen* with phoney German accents. The making of the film had also been marred by the death of a stunt-flyer; Corman's boast had always previously been that nobody ever got hurt making his films, even in the most cut-price days. And there was one further decisive factor: Corman was getting married for the first time.

Quick, cheap and popular

And so at 44, having already been responsible in various capacities for the creation of over 150 movies, Roger Corman 'retired' to run New World Pictures on the same principles he had always applied to the business of film-making: make 'em quick, make 'em cheap, and make 'em popular. Already renowned for having given a first helping hand to such people as Gary Kurtz, Francis Coppola, Jack Nicholson and Peter Bogdanovich, he now devoted his time and backing to wave after wave of aspiring newcomers, Lewis Teague, John Sayles, Joe Dante, Aaron Lipstadt, Jonathan Demme and Penelope Spheeris. The stories told about his requirements as a producer are often hilarious: your best chance to make a picture at New World was to assert you could do it for less than



Corman behind the camera for the last time directing *Von Richthofen* and *Brown* in 1970.

the company's previous lowest budget – and Corman would *still* haggle. He would cut ruthlessly and insist on regular infusions of violent action. But he had an unfaltering instinct for what would sell, and by the time he cheerfully gave up New World in 1983 so that he could start up again somewhere else, he made \$16.5 million out of it.

Your best chance to make a picture at New World was to assert you could do it for less than the company's previous lowest budget

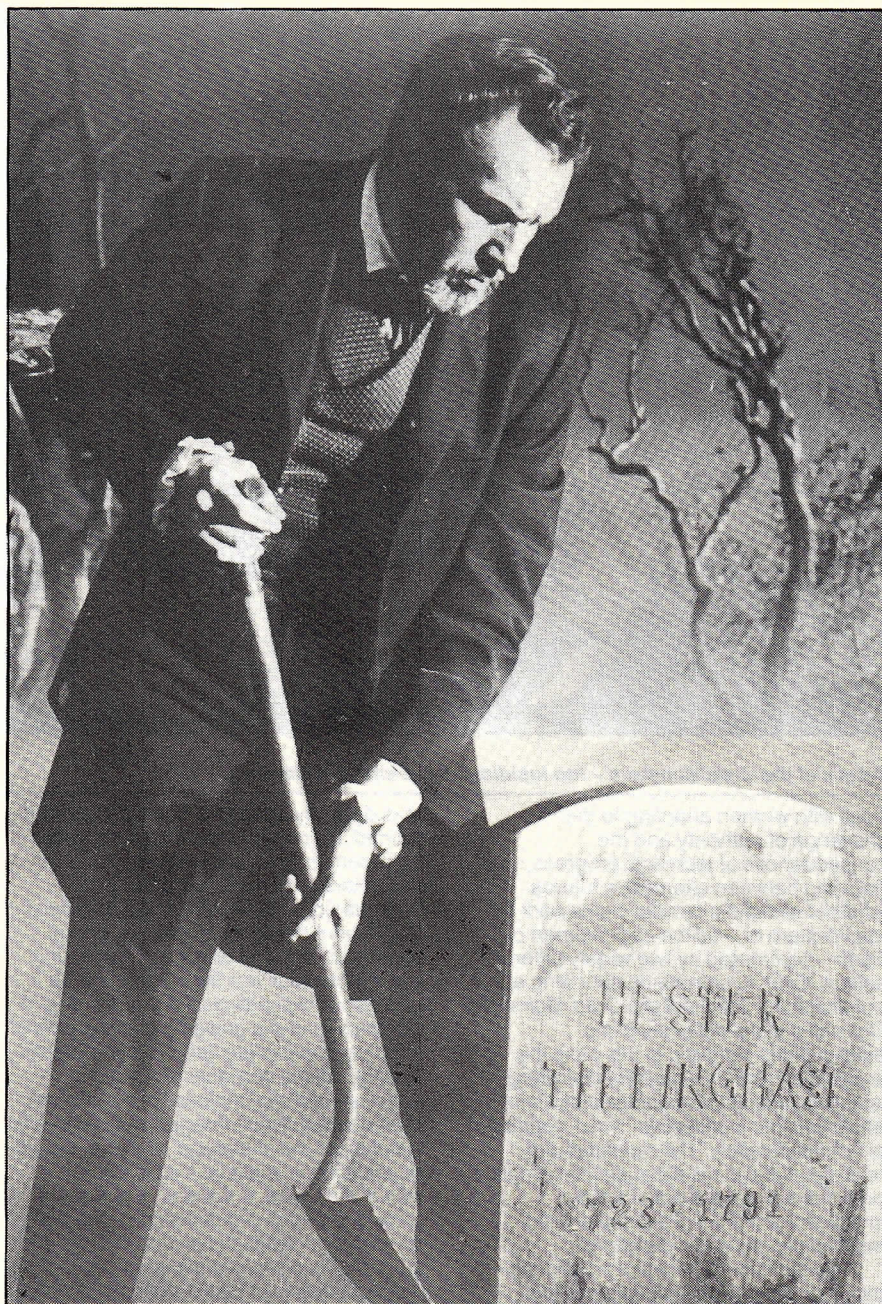
So for fifteen years, Corman the 'auteur' has been buried unidentifiably inside such epics of exploitation as *The Student Nurses*, *Deathrace 2000*, *Eat My Dust!*, *Street Girls*, *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, *Angels Hard as They Come* and *Battle Beyond the Stars*. They illustrate most vividly his skills as a promoter, but they reveal little about the unfailingly affable and charming 'real' Corman – except, perhaps, that he's an obsessive re-cycler of ideas, of people, of themes, and of images. As he admits, throughout his career what he has earned from each film he had recycled into the next, as though each production were part of a perpetually regenerative process. It should accordingly be no surprise – although at first glance it does seem out of character – that the project that has tempted him once more into the director's chair is a remake of *Frankenstein*.

It will be intriguing, of course, to see whether the New World era has had any noticeable effect on the Corman style, whether the experience of being a family man has significantly altered the outlook expressed in his pre-1970 material, and whether he has a new set of personal texts to explore with us. Might we expect him to identify with the classic monster-maker, on the basis that the creation of artificial life has been fundamental to the Corman career? Or will Baron Frankenstein prove to be a fresh incarnation of familiar Corman eccentrics like Roderick Usher or Prince Prospero?

Astonishing speed

In readiness for the encounter, some reminders might be useful about what was to be found in earlier Corman-directed films. As the filmography illustrates, these can roughly be divided into three groups: 1954–1960 (the 'quickies'), 1960–1964 (the Edgar Allan Poe series), and 1966–1970 (the 'mainstream' experiments). The first, with its marvellously sensational titles, is the least easy to define, partly because of its diversity and partly because the films have been out of circulation for years (and some have never been released in Britain), but from the available titles it does contain (available on 16mm, that is), some broad similarities can be spotted.

The most obvious – apart from the predictably evident fact that Corman made no claim to knowing how to make films when he started but learned fast as he went along – is that they dealt with small



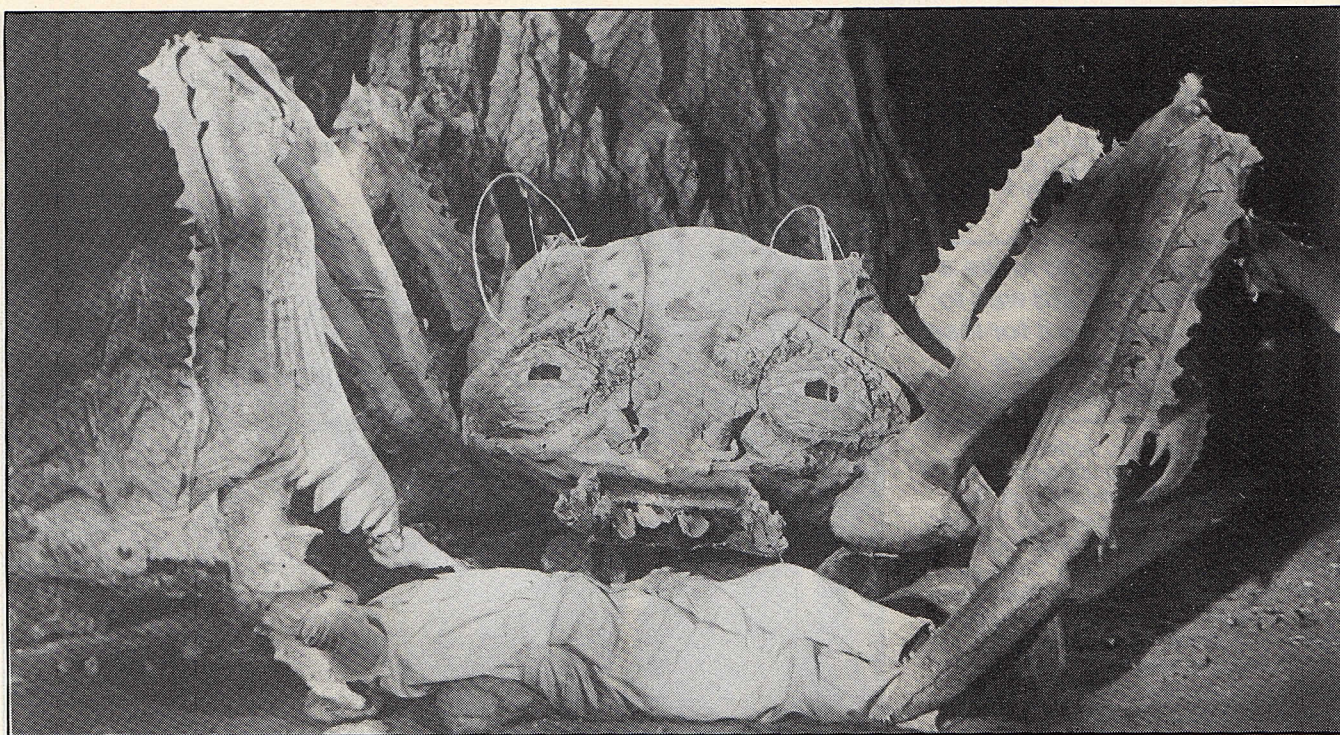
Vincent Price revives the dead in *The Haunted Palace*. Corman based the film on stories by Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft.



Ray Milland hungering for knowledge in *X – The Man with X-Ray Eyes*.

groups in isolated circumstances, which was all their budgets could afford. That they were made at astonishing speed (Corman once chalked up 73 shots in a single day) gives them an urgency and a directness that transcends their clear purpose as crowd-pullers. They were aimed at the drive-in-movie youth market with its taste for science-fictional horror and rock 'n' roll, and were compiled from non-existent special effects, cut-price monsters, and obscure otherwise-unemployed casts with what would appear the utmost cynicism but for the fact that, as one watched them, it was remarkably apparent that their stories had resonance and depth.

Consistently they dealt with survivors in a world of chaos (the world always seemed to be coming to an end in Corman's work), and with the strange, sad tensions between the individual members of groups in crisis. Most prominently, they



ALLIED ARTISTS

Attack of the Crab Monsters – too insidious to be easily dismissed.

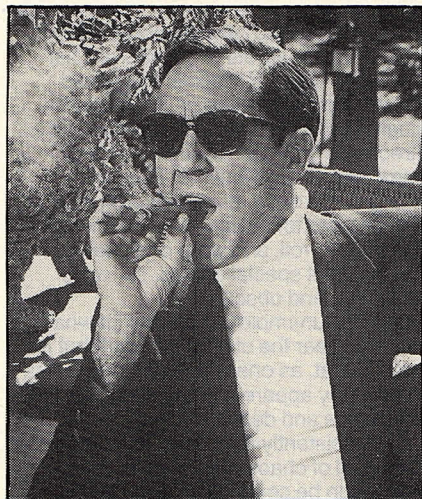
dealt with women adapting to the challenge of authority and the consequences of technical progress, deciding between alternative futures whether within the familiar framework of the Western or – as the *Last Woman on Earth* – confronted by two widely different suitors. Even in something sounding as outlandish as *Attack of the Crab Monsters*, Corman's story would lead into extraordinary territory, in this case the suggestion that on a steadily dwindling island victims of the monster-crabs are absorbed into a collective 'mind' capable of communication. The monsters are relatively ludicrous (although the glimpses on screen are kept brief), but the implications of their presence are too insidious to be easily dismissed.

By the time he was in a position to move to more generous budgets and longer shooting schedules, the themes that Corman pursued so elegantly in the

films distantly based on Poe were already defined. It's no problem, in fact, to trace the resemblances between the main characters in all the films made (for example) in 1963, even though only two are Vincent Price horror-stories, one is science fiction, and one a highly exciting and spectacular war film. Matching the richness of his settings, Corman's style in this era became a powerful combination of colour and elaborate camera movement – usually into the corridors of the cellar, where something unpleasant was bound to be noticed. If one image were needed to summarise the 'message' of these superb productions it would be that of *The Man with X-Ray Eyes*, in which the hunger for knowledge and understanding – literally for 'insight' – leads to horrific disaster. In the grim, brooding variations on the preoccupations of Poe's writings, Corman spelled out the Frankenstein complex several times over.

In his subsequent mainstream movies, courageously off-beat as they could be, (*The Trip*, *Gas-s-s-s!*), the incestuous families of Poe's reclusive eccentrics continued to make a stand against the punishments of the outside world. The Wild Angels, following their private rituals, defied the premature burial of one of their number and took his corpse to a party. Ma Barker, building a family stronghold against a toppling Depression era, embraced her sons in a fatal masque. And even Al Capone, eyes hidden behind the customary Corman dark-glasses, challenged convention for the sake of his own concept of loyalty and honour. Finally, the Red Baron took to the skies like the last of the heroes, conducting a one-man war with elemental forces only to be brought to earth by petty pragmatism. In a sense, Corman too has been grounded for the last fifteen years. It will be good to see him on the wing once more.

PHILIP STRICK



20TH CENTURY FOX

Jason Robards as Al Capone in *The St Valentine's Day Massacre*.

Filmography

Five Guns West (1954)
 Apache Woman (1955)
 The Day the World Ended (1955)
 Swamp Women (1955)
 The Oklahoma Woman (1955)
 Gunslinger (1956)
 It Conquered the World (1956)
 Not of this Earth (1956)
 The Undead (1956)
 She-Gods of Shark Reef (1956)
 Naked Paradise (1956)
 Attack of the Crab Monsters (1956)
 Rock All Night (1956)
 Teenage Doll (1957)
 Carnival Rock (1957)
 Sorority Girl (1957)
 The Viking Women and the Sea Serpent (1957)
 War of the Satellites (1957)
 Machine Gun Kelly (1958)
 Teenage Caveman (1958)
 I Mobster (1958)
 A Bucket of Blood (1959)
 The Wasp Woman (1959)
 Ski Troop Attack (1960)
 House of Usher (1960)
 The Little Shop of Horrors (1960)
 The Last Woman on Earth (1960)
 The Creature from the Haunted Sea (1960)
 Atlas (1960)
 The Pit and the Pendulum (1961)
 The Intruder (1961)
 The Premature Burial (1961)
 Tales of Terror (1962)
 Tower of London (1962)
 The Young Racers (1962)
 The Raven (1962)
 The Terror (1962)
 'X' – The Man with the X-Ray Eyes (1963)
 The Haunted Palace (1963)
 The Secret Invasion (1963)
 The Masque of the Red Death (1963)
 The Tomb of Ligeia (1964)
 The Wild Angels (1966)
 A Time for Killing (part only) (1966)
 Make It (1967)
 De Sade (part only) (1968)
 Bloody Mama (1969)
 Gas-s-s-s! (1969)
 Von Richthofen and Brown (The Red Baron) (1970)